

## ARTICLE

# How to Conduct a Literature Review

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A literature review provides a basis for consolidating research findings within a specific area into a cohesive document that gives a clear indication of current progress, limitations and future directions of the research stream. It allows practitioners and researchers alike to keep abreast of the latest research findings (e.g., on evidence-based therapeutic interventions). The aim of this paper is to provide a practical overview of how to conduct and write up a literature review. Further to discussing the practicalities of how to carry out a literature search, the structure and methodology of a review article are considered. Finally, the subjects of formatting and publication are examined.

## Questions to Consider Before you Begin

### 1. Who is your Target Audience?

Having a clear idea for whom the paper is intended will help shape the style and content of the article. Hence, you need to decide who your target audience is. Is the review intended to influence senior managers who are involved in policy formation or implementation? Does it seek to influence senior operational

managers as to how they may develop services or manage particular service provision challenges? Is the literature review aimed at influencing practitioners to work in a different way? Or its purpose could possibly be to champion service user perspectives.

### 2. What Publication do you Intend to Submit to?

Determination of your target audience will influence what publication you are likely to submit to. Given the choice of psychology related publications (see Table 1) it can be difficult to know where to begin in terms of submitting a literature review paper. If targeting members of a profession, that profession's newsletter or journal may be appropriate even for high quality literature reviews that would most probably be accepted for higher status publications. Interestingly, if targeting senior health care managers, the ranking of a publication most likely will be considered secondary to being able to forward them a PDF copy of your published paper on a particular topic that is of interest to them. Hence, it may of benefit to choose a publication that most likely will accept your literature review submission in a timely manner.

If the purpose of your literature review is to add new knowledge to the existing literature base, you can ensure maximum effect by publishing in a journal with a high impact factor (IF), especially one that your target audience holds in high esteem. The IF, a numeric value, is calculated each year by Thomson Scientific and is the average number of times papers in a journal have been cited in the previous two years (Dong, Loh, & Mondry, 2005). The higher a journal's IF the greater its impact. Most academic libraries in Ireland have subscriptions to online resources such as Journal Citation Reports™ that gives the IF of journals in scientific and social science journals.

Another option is to consider publishing in an open access (OA) journal. Such journals make papers publicly, permanently and freely available. This means that your organisation or peers will not have to pay to access your paper when it is published. However, most OA journals require a standard article processing charge. These fees may vary. A list of open access journals is available from the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) at <http://www.doaj.org>. You can search by subject and there are currently 53 journals in the area of psychiatry (correct October 2011). There is clear evidence that free access increases the number of article downloads, although its impact on article citations is not clear (Davis & Walters, 2011). If targeting a particular journal, you need to review its author submission guidelines. These detail the journal's content area scope (e.g., psychotherapies, health services management) and the types of papers accepted (e.g., original papers, clinical case reports, brief research reports, review articles, perspective articles, historical papers, editorials, practice reviews, letters to the editor, book reviews). Some publications will prioritise and fast track original data papers, as they might shorter papers. So while details of the maximum acceptable length of each type of paper will also be typically profiled, it is advisable to use the minimum amount of words needed to write your paper.

Although it is advisable to completely omit any formatting up until the final draft, the guidelines will also profile formatting requirements such as a title page, abstract (e.g., structured, unstructured) and key words, all of which may help future literature researchers. A common format for structured abstracts might include objectives, methods, results (or findings) and conclusions. Regarding referencing style, many psychology publications will adhere to the American Psychological Association (APA, 2009) style (i.e., alphabetised references), while other (typically medical) journals will require the Vancouver style where references are numbered in the order in which they appear in the text (International Committee of Medical Journal Editors, 1991). If the latter, unless you have software (e.g., Endnote) that automatically orders references numerically, it is best to use the APA style referencing for successive drafts and then convert to the Vancouver style for the final or submission draft of your paper. Guidelines will also provide details of how to present tables and figures, the inclusion of which can provide a better balance to a paper and hence better engage readers.

*Table 1. Some Psychology and Mental Health Related Publications*

Publication	Description
Annual Review of Psychology	Highest ranking psychology journal (IF=18.288)*
Annual Review of Clinical Psychology	Third highest ranking psychology journal (IF=9.743)*
Clinical Psychology Forum	The official monthly publication of the Division of Clinical Psychology on the British Psychological Society (BPS)
Irish Journal of Psychological Medicine	Ireland's only peer reviewed psychiatry journal
Irish Psychiatrist	The official journal of the College of Psychiatry of Ireland
Psychological Bulletin	Second highest ranking psychology journal (IF=11.975)*
Psychology Review	Fourth highest ranking psychology journal (IF=7.784)*
Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics	Fifth highest ranking psychology journal (IF=6.000)*
The Irish Journal of Psychology	The peer reviewed academic journal of The Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI)
The Irish Psychologist	The official newsletter of the PSI
The Psychologist	The monthly publication of the BPS

\* Source: Journal Citation Reports; [http://www.rug.nl/bibliotheek/locaties/bibcmb/instructies\\_auteurs/top\\_25/index](http://www.rug.nl/bibliotheek/locaties/bibcmb/instructies_auteurs/top_25/index); Accessed 06.10.11

### *3. What is the Timeframe in which you want to Publish your Review?*

Engaging with the relatively lengthy submission/peer review/integration of feedback/resubmission process of peer reviewed journals will invariably add to the quality of your published literature review and will heighten its status, especially among the academic community. However, if for example you want to influence policy formulation, your review will need to be published while the issue you are focusing on is still in the spotlight. Hence, if you want to publish in a peer reviewed journal, you need to remain ahead of the curve in anticipating hot topics. This means being able to identify topics that will be of interest to policy makers and starting your literature review possibly up to a minimum of one year before the issue becomes a pressing concern for policy makers (and/or service providers). An alternative and easier option would be to submit to a non-peer reviewed and lower status publication where the submission process will most likely be quicker.

Creating and maintaining momentum in any research project is important. Hence, you (and other contributors) need to ring-fence protected time to ensure that subsequent drafts of your

paper are produced and reviewed in a timely manner so that your projected submission deadline is met. It can be difficult to reenergise your literature review project if it stagnates or progress slows considerably.

#### 4. Decide on your Research Team

Rather than going solo and conducting a literature review by yourself, this process and the quality of your final paper will probably benefit by asking others with knowledge of the content area to work with you. For example, an academic and/or a clinician with a working knowledge of a particular topic could provide guidance on how to conduct your literature search and to structure initial drafts of your paper and review penultimate drafts of it. To avoid confusion advance agreement is required regarding who is noted as first and subsequent authors. A good rule of thumb is to order authors, not based on seniority, but on the amount of work inputted into producing the literature review. It will also be important for you as lead author to drive the literature review process. You need to ensure that each contributor follows through in a timely manner on their input and to ensure multiple inputs are coordinated. To keep track of various drafts it is advisable to insert the date of each as a header. You can track changes made to drafts by asking all collaborators to use the reviewing function in Microsoft Office Word and then accept or reject these changes as appropriate. This function also facilitates the posting of comments throughout the text by each contributor.

## Literature Search

### How to Conduct a Literature Search

Before starting to search the literature, it is useful to spend a few minutes thinking about your search. To do this, begin by writing down your research question. Next, highlight the subjects or keywords that are part of your question. Now think about synonyms for these subjects. You also need to consider different spellings. The literature will contain both American and European spellings (e.g., Pediatric and Paediatric). To capture both sets of spellings you can use truncation and wildcards in your search. Each database differs in the symbol that it uses. For example, you could search for "P\*diatric" that would capture both variations of spellings. Alternatively databases are indexed using a thesaurus. You can search for your subject by clicking on the thesaurus and it will return the preferred heading – this will include alternate spellings. The Cochrane Library, PubMed and Medline all use the MeSH (Medical Subject Headings) thesaurus. Thesauri in other databases vary. PsycINFO uses subject headings from the Thesaurus of Psychological Index Terms. This controlled vocabulary, also known as index terms or descriptors, is used by APA's indexers to describe the content of a document. Consult a librarian for further advice on other databases.

Table 2 outlines some literature searching methods. While many will be familiar with the use of Boolean operators, the PICO method is promoted by organisations such as the Centre for Evidence-Based Medicine (CEBM) in Oxford. More evidence-based tools and tips for searching are available from the CEBM website. Developed by librarians at the King's Fund Library, the ECLIPSE method may be useful for health management and policy searches (Wildridge & Bell, 2002).

Table 2. Some Literature Searching Methods

Searching method	Some Specifics of...
Boolean operators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• AND – Narrows a search, making it more specific.</li> <li>• OR – Broadens a search, making it more general.</li> <li>• NOT – e.g., "anxiety NOT depression" will return results of articles about anxiety only.</li> </ul>
PICO method	Break down the search into its components parts: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• P – Population / Problem</li> <li>• I – Intervention / Indicator</li> <li>• C – Comparator</li> <li>• O – Outcome</li> </ul>
ECLIPSE method	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• E (Expectation) – What does the search requester want the information for?</li> <li>• C (Client Group); L (Location); I (Impact) – What is the change in the service, if any, that is being looked for? What would constitute success? How is this being measured?</li> <li>• P (Professionals); S (Service) – For which service are you looking for information? For example, outpatient services, nurse-led clinics, intermediate care?</li> </ul>

### Databases

You need access to databases in order to conduct a literature search. Within the HSE, databases can be accessed through the HSE Library ([www.hselibrary.ie](http://www.hselibrary.ie)). You need an Athens account to login to the online library. To set up one, go to the HSE Library page, click on the area in which you work and then go to "set up Athens account" on the left hand side of the page. Within 1 to 3 days your account will be activated. All staff directly employed by the HSE are eligible to apply for an Athens account – licences do not currently cover HSE funded agencies and voluntary hospitals. In the disability sector there is a consortium of intellectual disability and allied libraries called IDAAL that has an online library available at <http://www.idaal.com>. The voluntary hospitals are linked to academic institutions with libraries onsite. Regardless of which Irish organisation you are working for, HSE libraries throughout Ireland operate an open door policy whereby you will be assisted with your research and given onsite access to libraries and online facilities.

There are over 2,500 titles and over 50 databases that can be accessed from the HSE Athens Library. The full list of the databases can be seen by clicking on "A to Z journal list" and by going into the index. Table 3 lists some of these, including some that are specific to mental health.

*Table 3. Some Databases that can be Accessed Through the HSE Library*

Database	Description
American Journal of Psychiatry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The official journal of the American Psychiatric Association</li> </ul>
CINAHL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Otherwise known as Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature</li> <li>Fulltext of over 770 journals in the area of nursing and allied health</li> </ul>
Cochrane Library	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Journals on mental health based on current empirical evidence for various audiences including researchers, policy makers, carers and service users</li> </ul>
Dynamed*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Shown to be the most current point of care reference tool (Banzi et al., 2011)</li> </ul>
Embase*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Coverage of over 7,500 journals. Largely a pharmaceutical database. Useful for toxicological research, adverse drug reactions information &amp; clinical trial studies</li> </ul>
Lenus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>An Irish repository for health care information</li> </ul>
OVID Nursing & Mental Health Collections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Database access to over 20 nursing &amp; mental health journals</li> </ul>
PsycINFO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Indexes papers from a range of peer reviewed journals in the behavioural sciences and mental health</li> <li>Contains over three million records and summaries dating as far back as the 1600s</li> </ul>
PsycARTICLES*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fulltext companion to PsycINFO</li> </ul>
The Journals of the Royal College of Psychiatrists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The British Journal of Psychiatry, The Psychiatrist, and Advances of Psychiatric Treatment</li> </ul>
PubMed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Citations for biomedical literature from MEDLINE, life science journals, and online books</li> </ul>
Psychology & Behavioural Science	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fulltext coverage of over 400 journals covering topics in emotional and behavioural characteristics, psychiatry &amp; psychology, mental processes, anthropology, and observational &amp; experimental methods</li> </ul>
Uptodate*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Point of care clinical tool with evidence-based summaries</li> </ul>

\*Databases may not be available in all HSE areas

Google Scholar is also a useful point of reference when searching for literature. It is a web search engine that indexes many peer reviewed journals across many disciplines. It provides a broader range of articles than the standard academic databases. However, not all publishers are accessible via Google Scholar which is why it is important to conduct a database search. There is minimal information about its content such as publisher lists, journal lists, time span or the disciplinary distribution of records (Kousha & Thelwall, 2007). Although it provides an easy interface to search and locate literature, no serious researcher interested in current medical information or practice excellence would rely on it for up-to-date information (Vine, 2006). Many more of databases therein may be irrelevant but it is quick, easy to use and can sometimes present an article you may have missed in your database search. To use it, go into Google, click the “more” tab on the top the page and select “Scholar.” Next select “advanced Scholar search.” This will give you advanced search options where you can exclude terms without the words, search for phrases with the exact phrase, search for authors or within publications. There are more tips available from the “advanced search tips” link.

Google Scholar can also be accessed from the home page on the HSE library MyAthens website once you are logged into your Athens account. Like the other databases, you can also limit the time frame of your search. This means that you could limit the search to more recent literature (e.g., since 2006). To do this type your search term into Google Scholar and when the results appear there will be a tab saying “anytime” under the search box. This will allow you to select literature that has been published since a specific year and remove older articles from your search result. When selecting the papers to be included in your review, you might want to ensure that included studies have a reliable methodology (see Table 4) and add useful knowledge to the research area.

Another area that may be relevant when doing a literature review is to include a search for grey literature. Grey literature is “that which is produced on all levels of government, academics, business and industry in print and electronic formats, but which is not controlled by commercial publishers” (Grey Literature Conference, 1999). OA repositories, websites of professional groupings, clinical trial registries, theses and conference proceedings all constitute grey literature. The difficulty is that this type of research is tricky to locate. Generally, searching individual websites and using search engines (e.g., Google) will yield meaningful results.

In addition to the many journals and databases available, there are two unique online resources. Managed by the HSE, Lenus (<http://www.lenus.ie/hse/>) is an Irish internet based repository for health care information (Lawton & Byrne, 2012). The materials hosted on this OA site include Irish publications on clinical research and evaluations of official policy. Another resource within the HSE is HSELand ([www.hseland.ie](http://www.hseland.ie)). Although this relatively new website is intended to support the training and development of staff working in the Irish health sector, it has the capacity to become an effective means of promoting and accessing current and historic health care documents and publications (McHugh, Byrne, & Liston, 2012).



*Table 4. Dimensions of Research Papers that need to be Considered*

Information	
Sample size and type	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The sample size of the study needs to be given – were there a sufficient number of participants?</li> <li>• Can the findings of the study be generalised to a wider population?</li> </ul>
Type of design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The type of design used will have implications for how the findings can be assessed – was it an experimental, observational or longitudinal study?</li> </ul>
Measures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What measures were used – self-report, implicit, other report or observational measures?</li> <li>• The names and purpose of these measures need to be detailed. For example, the Beck Depression Inventory II (BDI-II) is a screening questionnaire for low mood</li> </ul>
Setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Laboratory or in applied setting? Confounding variables can be controlled within the laboratory but how applicable are laboratory results in real life settings?</li> </ul>
Effect size	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Measures the strength of a relationship between two variables and is a means by which the effectiveness of different studies can be compared</li> </ul>
Strengths and limitations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did the paper adequately achieve its aim? Was the methodology suitable? Did it produce findings that can be applied within the field?</li> </ul>
Other potential methodological features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comparison group; random assignment; diagnostic homogeneity; not on medication; pre and post treatment assessment; follow-up assessment at three months or later; service user and significant other self-report; therapist and researcher ratings; assessment of clinical significance; use of experienced therapists; manualised treatments; provision of therapy supervision; monitoring of treatment integrity</li> </ul>

## Literature Review Write Up

### Introduction

The introduction of a literature review needs to be kept as concise as possible and use a minimum amount of words. It is advisable to start with a broader focus and become narrower and more specific as the introduction advances. The aims and objectives of the article also need to be laid out as does the relevance of the review to the particular field. Is the review filling any gaps in extant literature or is it introducing something new (e.g., a theoretical model or an intervention)?

### Body of Text

The body of the text needs to be divided up into subsections that hit the key points as laid out in the introduction. Each subsection can be titled so that the reader can more easily locate specific information if they require it. When profiling the referenced studies specific information needs to be supplied. Each piece of information can be used to assess the quality of located studies and their findings. This information can also indicate what future research can be undertaken to expand upon current findings. It may be useful to produce a table with all the studies included in the review. The headings of the table may vary depending on the publication source and the type of review being conducted but the key ones may include the author and year, the design of the study (with the sample size and type included), the measures used in the study and the findings (see Table 4).

### Discussion

The structure of the discussion and/or conclusion section of a literature review is nearly the opposite of the introduction section in that the focus needs to be quite specific to begin with and then it can broaden out. Begin with information specific to the review and then expand upon how your review can be used to conduct further research in the related area. It needs to begin with a summary of the information presented in the body of the text. Further to outlining your findings, if some of these are inconsistent or incongruent with previous findings, you need to try to provide a viable explanation for such discrepancies. At this point you may present a new theory or hypothesis to explain your findings. You then need to consider the limitations of your review. It is useful to provide some limitations. However, to demonstrate that these are not sufficient to discredit the value of your review, you also need to highlight the strengths of your review. Finally, on foot of your findings, it is worth considering the direction that future research in the area under study needs to take.

### Meta-analysis

You might consider conducting a meta-analysis if you want to compare the effectiveness of two or more clinical interventions in your literature review (e.g., CBT versus psychoanalysis versus a waiting list control condition). This statistical technique is commonly used to assess the performance and efficiency of health care interventions. It can provide information about the mean and variance of study populations, effect size variability and differences in moderator variables. Consult Field and Gillett (2010) for in-depth instructions of how to conduct a meta-analysis.

### Publishing

#### Adhere to a Publishing Strategy

Haslam and Laham (2010) conducted a longitudinal study in which they evaluated the impact of two types of academic publishing strategies. They tracked the progression of 85 social psychology doctoral students for 10 years. The first strategy was named quality that was defined as the mean IF and article impact score. The second was quantity which was the mean number of articles published. They found that the impact of the scientist in her/his field was associated more with the quantity

of articles s/he had published than the quality of articles s/he had published. They concluded that it is as important, if not more important, to publish frequently as it is to publish in higher ranked journals. They also indicated that if a scientist restricts his/her work to high IF journals, doing so may limit the amount of publications s/he achieves and could possibly damage their long-term career prospects. Similarly, rather than papers being rejected due to their lack of quality, Hewlett (2002) posited that many rejections are due to a manuscript journal mismatch in which the submitted paper does not fit the perspective of the journal. Accordingly, submitting to a speciality journal may increase your chances of getting published.

Coauthorship within the field of psychology became increasingly common in the later decades of the twentieth century and is now considered quite typical (Cronin, Shaw, & La Barre, 2003). Indeed, research collaboration can be a fruitful research and publishing strategy within scientific disciplines and can lead to increased productivity in terms of number of papers published, time saving and increased access to limited resources (Francescheta & Costantinib, 2010). Despite potential associated disadvantages (e.g., divergent perspectives on what should be included and who should receive the most credit; Sonnenwald, 2007), collaboration is a useful consideration before commencing work on your paper.

### The Politics of Publishing

In a widely cited commentary on publishing in the field of science, Lawrence (2003) wrote that editors in highly rated journals may favour the safe and fashionable articles over original pieces. This, he wrote, is due to the highly stressful environment in which editors have limited time to adequately read and review all the submissions they receive. This, he suggested, can lead to innovative research being rejected as editors are sometimes unwilling to risk publishing unfamiliar and unprecedented papers. He also suggested that increasingly busy editors can find it difficult to review specialised research and therefore more editorial power is put into the hands of the reviewers. The latter could then lead to a situation where a scientist abuses the reviewing role by holding up a competitor or by having a favourable bias towards a known colleague. Lawrence also suggested that there is pressure upon authors themselves as they are being judged more on where they publish than the quality of their work. His editorial goes on to examine the means by which such politics can be remedied, the key to which is to diminish the fixation upon journal ratings. He also suggested that authors publish more in OA websites and specialised journals.

In another article reviewing publication procedures, Schwartz and Zamboanga (2005) presented a range of methods by which the editorial and reviewing processes of journals can be improved. These included editors giving authors feedback on their papers independent of the reviewers. They also advised that reviewers should not review the same paper more than once.

### Resubmissions

Your submission may evoke at least five categories of response: accept; accept with revision; revise and resubmit; reject and resubmit; and reject. Anything but a complete rejection can be seen as positive (Hewlett, 2002). It is advisable to embrace and

integrate reviewer feedback and resubmit your revised paper in a timely manner, complete with a separate document outlining your response to each point of reviewer feedback (e.g., how you have integrated the feedback, or your rationale for not doing so).

### Conclusion

A literature review can summarise a large volume of research within an area and provide a means to deliver a persuasive, evidence-based argument. It can be used to influence a variety of people including managers, practitioners or service users. Although conducting each literature review will present unique challenges, the process of doing so is similar for all reviews (see Figure 1). Before you begin your review you need to determine your target audience. As it will influence the format and content of your paper, you need to know the type of publication you are writing for. If you are planning to impact policy making you need to schedule projected publication while the targeted issue is still under consideration. You may consider working in collaboration with others.



Figure 1. Summary of Steps to Conducting a Literature Review

There are many ways in which you can increase the range and specificity of your literature search. Being familiar with search methodologies can be useful in creating a stock of relevant literature for your review. It is also beneficial to use multiple databases when conducting your search. When writing up your review a general introduction to the topic area needs to precede a consideration of more specific extant literature and the key aims and objectives of the article. You need to review the identified research studies in the body of the text (see Table 4). Your discussion needs to consider your findings, the limitations of your review and any suggestions for future research.

Formulated from the outset, you need to adhere to your publishing strategy, be it to submit to low or high IF publications. Although both are open to biased or political interference the process of submitting (e.g., peer review) to most publications will add to the quality of your paper and a better resource for colleagues and others.

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